

Exploring Dia de Los Muertos: A Celebration of Life!

Grade Level: 4th Grade (Homeschool)

Time Allotment: 60-90 minutes

Lesson Activities:

1. Introduction: What is Dia de Los Muertos? (10 min)

Begin by asking: "Have you ever heard of Dia de Los Muertos or the Day of the Dead? What do you think it might be about? Have you seen pictures of colorful skulls or skeletons sometimes around Halloween?" Explain that today, we're learning about a special holiday celebrated mainly in Mexico. It's not meant to be scary like Halloween; it's a happy time to remember family and friends who have passed away. Watch a short, age-appropriate video introducing Dia de Los Muertos.

2. Exploring Traditions (20 min)

Discuss the video and introduce key concepts:

- **When and Where:** Explain it's celebrated on November 1st and 2nd, primarily in Mexico and by people of Mexican heritage elsewhere.
- **Purpose:** It's a celebration of life and remembrance, believing that spirits of loved ones return during this time.
- **Ofrenda (Offering Altar):** Show pictures of ofrendas. Explain they are altars set up in homes or cemeteries. Discuss common items and their symbolism:
 - Photos of loved ones
 - Their favorite foods and drinks (like *pan de muerto* - bread of the dead)
 - Marigolds (*cempasāchil*): Their bright color and scent are thought to guide the spirits.
 - Candles: To light the way for the spirits.
 - *Calaveras* (Skulls): Often made of sugar, decorated brightly. They represent the deceased and are fun, not frightening.
 - *Papel Picado*: Colorful tissue paper cut into intricate designs.
- **Calaveras (Skulls):** Emphasize that these skulls are symbols of life, death, and rebirth. They are decorated with smiles, bright colors, and patterns to express the joy and celebration of life. Show examples of decorated sugar skulls or illustrations.

3. Activity: Create Papel Picado (15 min)

Take a piece of colored construction paper. Fold it several times (like making a snowflake). Cut various shapes along the edges and inside the folded paper. Carefully unfold it to reveal your *papel picado* banner. You can make several in different colors.

4. Activity: Decorate a Calavera (15 min)

Using a printable template or by drawing a simple skull shape on white paper, decorate your own *calavera*. Use bright markers or crayons. Add flowers, patterns, swirls, and give it a 'personality'. Remember, these are meant to be joyful!

5. Activity: Mini Ofrenda (Optional Extension, 10 min)

Using a small box or tray, create a simple ofrenda. Arrange your *papel picado* and decorated *calavera*. Add a (battery-operated) candle if available. If comfortable, add a photo or a small item representing a loved one (or simply as a general symbol of remembrance). Discuss who or what you are choosing to remember.

6. Comparing Holidays: Dia de Los Muertos vs. Halloween (10 min)

Use a Venn diagram (printable or draw one) or just discuss the similarities and differences between Dia de Los Muertos and Halloween.

- **Similarities:** Happen around the same time of year, involve imagery of skulls/skeletons.
- **Differences:** DDLM = Remembrance, honoring ancestors, celebration of life, Mexican origin, multi-day. Halloween = Fright, costumes, trick-or-treating, Celtic/European origin, single night.

Emphasize the different feelings and purposes behind each holiday.

7. Conclusion and Review (5 min)

Review the key vocabulary: *Dia de Los Muertos, ofrenda, calavera, cempasÃ©chil*. Ask: "What is the most important thing to remember about Dia de Los Muertos?" (Answer: It's a happy celebration to remember loved ones). Briefly discuss that remembering people who are important to us is something many cultures do, even if they do it in different ways.

Assessment:

Observe participation in discussions and activities. Review the completed *papel picado* and decorated *calavera*. Check the Venn diagram or listen to the student's comparison of the two holidays. Ask wrap-up questions to gauge understanding of the holiday's meaning and traditions.